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One wonders how long this nation can survive the self-doubt, self-criticism, and cynicism that have come about as a result of Watergate. One wonders about the endurance of the nation - the idea - in the midst of a crisis that seems to have no end. Ideas die first - the institutions built on those ideas more slowly - but they die just as surely. And so thoughful people are concerned today about what is happening to the heart of the nation.

I was interested, in this context, to read an editorial on the Presidency in Time magazine entitled "We go on as a people". It began by documenting the current mood of crisis - but found solace in the observation that .... "something special endures, and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, ins and outs, accused and accusers". What inspired that observation was a memorial service for Columnist Stewart Alsop in Washington's St. John's Church.

The people who have made this country go for several decades were there. They read the Psalms together, and afterward-according to the editorial,- "hate died. As the service ended, there seemed to be almost a conscious effort by adversaries to seek each other out and say a kind word."

Newsmen and White House aides chatted: editors and former cabinet officers exchanged quiet greetings .... "There seemed to be a reluctance to break the spell, to resume the family fight."

I was glad to read that editorial. Having read Stewart Alsop's chronicle of his battle against Cancer, I think he would have liked the fact that his Memorial Service brought Americans together on a level deeper than their divisions. I enjoyed the editorial also because it reminded me so much of the church, people who often are divided from each other: people who can be and are often petty with each other: and yet people who in a deeper sense belong to each other.

What came to the surface at Alsop's Memorial was a commonly shared nationality: something literally given to each of the people present, bigger than any of them - something with a history before them and a future that

will go on after them. And what comes to the surface here in the church; or rather what needs occassionally to come to the surface - at communion, for instance, is much the same. A shared faith - a common hope - and a solid sense that no matter how divided or unrelated we may seem, we really do belong to each other and love each other.

It doesn't happen often enough, however, and I would guess that for some people and some churches it doesn't happen at all.

C. S. Lewis once wrote a delightful chronicle of a correspondence between a Sr. devil - Screwtape and an apprentice devil - Wormwood, under the title The Screwtape Letters. Wormwood is on assignment, charged with seducing a man into hell.

Listen to Screwtape's second letter to him:

My Dear Wormwood,

I note with grave displeasure that your patient has become a Christian. Do not indulge the hope that you will escape the usual penalties; indeed in your better moments, I trust you would haruly even wish to do so. In the meantime we mu-t make the best of the situation. There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the Enemy's camp and are now with us. All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still inour favour.

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished,sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understnads, and one shabby little book containing c

corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks around him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like "the body of Christ" and the actual faces in the new pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to our Father below, is a fool. Provided that ny of those neighbours sing out of turne, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous. At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of "Christians" in his mind which he suppposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial. His mind is full of togas and sandals and armour and bare legs and the mere fact that the other people in church wear modern clothes is a real - though of course an unconscious - difficulty for him. Never let it come to the surface: never let him ask what he expected them to look loke. Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords.

The tragedy is that Screwtape was more right than wrong. All of us have a vision somewhere in thie recesses of our minds about what a Christian ought to look like. what the Church ought to feel like: what real Christian Community ought do be. And for all of us those noble, albeit hazy vision pop like so many balloons wherever we confront the very people with whom we worship Sunday after Sunday.

St. Paul confronted the dilemna in the early Christian Church at Galetia: he told the people that their relationship with each other ought to be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindn ess, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness: he told them to be healing rather than judging when one of their number offended the rest and then he used a phrase that, for me at least,

summarized that special, bed-rock relationship that happens in the Church: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ". (6:2)

What's what a church is for. That is the special quality of life which distinguishes a church from any other group: and it is around that activity that the church may rally in a time of crisis. We ~~XXXXXX~~ needn't be embarrassed by it - or ashamed of it. Church is where we go to find someone to help bear our burden.

So, we come this morning to the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us remember that he has invited us to come - that he will bear whatever burden we carry. Let us remember that he has invited us to his table together - and that in sharing the elements - in serving each other - we are celebrating ~~XXX~~ that which is special about us and our relationship. AMEN

FATHER, in Jesus Christ, you have promised to bear our burdens: you have given us that ministry as a gift. Help us to love each other - to accept and forgive each other: to bear each other's burdens. AMEN